

How to be calm and focused when fear and anxiety overwhelm us?

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Before we look at this question, let me start by telling you a Greek story.

Antaeus was some sort of a giant. He was the son of Mother Earth Gaia and the father was Poseidon, the god of the sea. Antaeus had a strange occupation. He would force passersby to wrestle with him and his technique was to pin down the victim to the ground and crush them. It was a strange expression of his devotion towards his father as he wanted to build a temple made of skulls of the victims for his father. The thing about Antaeus was he was always connected to mother earth and a result of which he could not be defeated. Hercules tried. Hercules realized that the strength of Antaeus comes from his contact from mother Earth. So, he separated him physically from his mother and Antaeus lost all his powers. Hercules lifted Antaeus off the ground. Then he could defeat and kill him. So the reason Antaeus lost his life was that he lost contact with Mother Earth, Gaia as is said in the Greek civilization and mother Earth represents sustenance, nourishment, stability and most importantly support and vitality.



So, we have to look into

What is it that gives us stability and support?

What is it that sustains us?

What is it that nourishes us?

We have to answer these questions as only

we can do it.

Imagine yourself as a tree and as a tree you are drawing in lot of resources.

For you to stand firm and strong, your roots have to grow really deep and wide and strong enough so that whenever there is a wind you can swing with it and if there is a storm you are

flexible enough to bend because the roots hold very steady. Whether it is lashing wind or rain the tree can handle it. The reason the tree has become strong is because it has interacted with the many elements drawing from the universal framework of dharma.

Dharma here is not religion or a mandate from God but it is that which is in everyone's heart which supports society. When we talk about Dharma, we are talking about universal values like love, justice, compassion, productivity, sharing, giving, discipline and so on.

Draw a tree in the centre of the paper and around it, you can draw the values that have sustained you. Some guiding principles for this are,

1. Write the names of people in your life that you find very supportive, nurturing and nourishing you.
2. Write or draw a symbol of a place that you feel safe and where you feel happy. It can be a metaphorical place, a memory of a particular place or it can be a part of your home or a part of somebody else's home. Try and look at it vividly and what makes it so special.
3. Write the principles that have guided your life. So here if you have to take a pick between love, justice, compassion, kindness, productivity, fun, pleasure, what have been those values that have been an integral part of your life?
4. Any practice that you do, that has really improved the quality of your life. The practice maybe something like a yogasana, waking up early in the morning, it might be eating healthy, speaking in a particular way to people. Some practice that cuts across all areas of your life that has really improved the quality of your life.
5. The moments in your life that have made you feel proud of your achievements.

Basically what you have drawn is **your strength that is your foundation.**

The thing about the foundation of your life, is that when you are really rooted, it is very difficult to be shaken.

When the tree is strongly rooted, it is difficult to shake the tree. Likewise when the immune system is strong, it is able to fight off infections quite easily. Is there a guarantee that no infection will strike because your immune system is strong. Obviously not!

Having a strong immune system increases our ability to fight.

Now, if we imagine our emotional landscape to be our immune system, which emotions and values does it need to have? We might say Courage, Forbearance, Gratitude, Kindness, Happiness and Cheerfulness.

We would like this immune system of our emotions and values to have these universal principles that have stood the test of time.

The beauty is when you take your attention to it; you see that **dharma lies in every human heart.**

The more we act with these values and principles the more it strengthens your foundation, the more it strengthens the foundation of society. Of course if we go one step further we see that Dharma indeed is Ishvara (Bhagavan) in the form of the intelligence and the material that sustains the universe.

When is the right time for me to develop a right foundation?

You already have a good solid foundation.

And every day you strengthen your foundation.

Much like the army, that does not start preparing for war on the eve of the war.

The army is preparing for battle every day.

They are battle ready because of their preparation.

So if we work on our stability and our connections through mother earth whatever that means in our culture we will be better prepared to fight any infection or difficulty that comes as a gust of air or very strong wind or a storm, a tsunami also. Each and everything helps.

Doing pranayama, our habits, diet, nutrition, exercise, our lifestyle, rest, yoga, people in our life, prayers.

Dealing with Fear:

When it comes to fear as an emotion, I make a distinction.

I recognize **healthy fear and unhealthy fear which is a buildup of fear that overwhelms us.** So like any other emotion, fear is also one of them.

Fear is one of the emotions and it is the part of the emotional landscape. Has it been created by you? No. Has it been created by me? No. Then it is an emotion, a protective response given to us.

Fear is a huge gift.

Why? Because it protects you, alerts you.

There is a very deep intelligence in the way the cause and effect of fear – the way which it works.

Healthy Fear:

It is our fear of poverty that makes us want to earn a living.

It is our fear of loneliness that makes us connect.

It is our fear of illness that makes us exercise and eat well.

It is our fear of ignorance of some subject matter that makes us study and learn.

It is our fear of dying that gives meaning to our life.

It is our fear of medical bills that makes me buy insurance.

You can see how this emotion called fear is a gift. It protects me. Imagine if I had no fear at all then it would be a very reckless life. So we are not going to fight healthy fear.

Thank you very much fear! We do a Namaskaar to fear!

You have played a very important role in my life and I am grateful for your presence!

You have protected me from a lot of harm!

You have protected me from me harming myself so on.

So we want to be very clear about this perspective that healthy fear is a gift given to us by Ishvara. Nothing to be afraid of!.

Unhealthy Fear:

The second type of fear is where we struggle. Because we are not able to keep that healthy fear healthy enough.

If it is healthy fear will protect us.

We will take the right actions because of fear.

But when it becomes overwhelming it paralyses us. Because on top of this healthy fear we have done a buildup.

How to deal with unhealthy fear?

1. **Stop the “What if Game”:** What if I get the virus? What if I get to the hospital and there is no bed? What if my parents fall ill? How and where will I take them? What if I die? What if there is no one to look after me?

This “What if Game” is a very helpful game if you are willing to make a plan. But if you cannot handle the consequences, then do not play the game. The only remedy for this build up is to STOP IT. So the practical and sensible thing to do when you find yourself reacting is to make a plan. Write it down in terms of what is going to happen, what you can do about it and then after that stop. Stop that chain of thought so that it is not there on a loop. Initially we might not have self mastery to be able to distract ourselves. So you distract yourself physically, then after sometime the auto suggestion will work. As you start to familiarize yourself with the ways of your mind you see that you are going overboard, you are getting carried away with the “What if Game”. Stop. So healthy fear will prompt you to act but you are no more going to entertain yourself with this game.

2. **Live in courage instead of living in fear –**

Courage is not the absence of fear.

Courage is saying “I can handle it despite the fear”.

In India there was a TV commercial for soft drink. And the tagline was “*jo dar gaya so mar gaya*”. Roughly translated as “If you are afraid, you are going to die”. Thankfully they changed it to saying “*dar ke aage jeet hai*”. Which means “Ahead of fear there is victory”.

Do not consume social media/news non-stop. Then the fear that is there, no longer dictates your life because you are thinking of what is the most constructive way to respond. **Living in courage means saying “I can handle it”.** This might involve quarantining oneself, washing your hands and social distancing. Do what is required. The more and more you take these actions, more and more you begin to see I can handle this.

‘I can handle this’ is a very important statement and if it becomes a pattern in your life then it calls for tremendous life competence. What you are really doing is creating new neural pathways in your brain. All of us have seen stones on the riverbanks that have patterns carved on them. These patterns have been created over time by the flowing water. The water kept flowing in a particular way and the patterns got etched. “I cannot handle it” - is a pattern. Now if water is poured on the stone, it will follow the path of least resistance and it will flow only in the existing pattern. So because of our earlier patterns of thinking, we have created these grooves in our mind. So don’t worry about the old pathways.

Create new pathways. The new pathway is “I can handle it”, which is born of some plan.

Otherwise it will be foolhardiness. You start to see your confidence and conviction in it increasing because you repeated several times and you do backup actions that support the idea. You are walking through a forest and there is no pathway. There need to be many people to walk through and create a new pathway. Same thing is really applicable to any new pattern. By repeatedly walking on that path, a pathway is created. So, one of the thought patterns you want to really develop is “I can handle it”. Whatever it is, I will figure it out, I will talk to people, seek support if required, I will pray and do whatever required.

3. **Claim the powers that you have.** Any overwhelm comes from thinking and feeling that I cannot handle this, it could be a cockroach, a lizard or a virus and we call this learned helplessness.

You never felt helpless as a child.

When you were a one year old child there was this red colour ball, about 6 feet away from you. You had *iccha shakti*, you had the power to desire that ball. You wanted it. You had *jnana shakti* – the power to think, reason. You could shout so that someone comes running or you could crawl. You had *kriya shakti*. You had the power to act. You did not have language but you could crawl. The important thing is that as a little child you were quite helpless but did not feel helpless. As we grew up we ‘learned’ to be and helpless. Modern psychology calls it ‘learned helplessness.

We have to just recognize that every moment we have been given these powers by Bhagavan and we claim them.

In any given situation I have the power to act which is Kriya Shakti,

I have the power to think which is Jnana Shakti, and

I have the power to desire that is Iccha Shakti.

All living beings have been given this, even this Corona virus is given this capacity. We have to claim the powers that we have been given, and then it is easy to say “I can handle it”.

4. **Stop reacting to a reaction.** “I am afraid” is a reaction. Full stop. But generally I don’t stop. I do a build-up. For example, “*I have been doing yoga for so long. I should not be feeling anxious. I am feeling more anxious and sad now. After all these years, despite doing so much, I am still struggling.*” Now you are going to feel even more sad because of the buildup of all those reactions. Your initial reaction was okay. Understand that **every reaction is a refusal to accept facts.**

We are not in harmony with the facts around us and therefore we react.

We don’t want things to be in a particular way and rightly so; none of us want to be infected. The infected want to recover. We don’t want people to die.

To be able to handle this, we have to understand whatever is possible of the laws and principles and respond in a way that is rooted in dharma.

The human condition

The Bhagavad Gita was revealed on the battlefield. Not the best of times for any kind of knowledge to take place because most knowledge we can absorb when we are relaxed. Here everyone is on edge. We are also waging a battle against the virus. What seems to be a topical problem based on an incident can also reveal a more fundamental problem that we all have, which is the human condition.

While we may live in courage, existentially, the human condition is a helpless condition because we want the permanent solution to the problem of sorrow. So we can use the time to go deeper into the study of the Bhagavad Gita. Bhagavan Krishna has quite a few things to say that there is no legitimate reason for anyone to experience sorrow. He gives reasons for that. He reveals what the nature of atma is. He says,

*Vaasamsi jeernani yathaa vihaaya, navaani grihNaati naropapraani.
Tathaa shareeraNi vihaaya jeernaani anyaani samyaati navaani dehi*

Just as for the indweller of the body(jiva), there are different stages childhood, youth and old age, similar is the gaining of another body. A helpful metaphor is offered. Just as a person gives up old clothes and takes up new ones, so does, the self, the one who dwells in the body, give up old bodies and takes others which are new.

Then on the topic of death he says,

*jaatasya hi dhruvo mrtyu dhruvam janma mrtasya cha
tasmaad aparihaaryerthe na tvam shochitum arhasi*

There is no reason for you to grieve because whatever is born is going to die and whatever is dead is going to be reborn. So there is no remedy for this. Astrology does suggest certain remedies for certain condition. There might be a remedy for an incurable disease by doing certain rituals or certain pujas. But what is the remedy for death? No remedy at all. That is the law of nature. So we are afraid of death because we are actually afraid to live.

Death is an event. We are not preparing to die as such, but we are preparing to live a meaningful life. We try and make most of our life by doing what we can to contribute.

We are the embodiments of dharma.

We are deeply rooted.

We are stable and if you have fruits as a tree that is your contribution to the world and people around you. Research study tells us that we are most happy when we know we have made a difference.

We can go deeper into the study of the Bhagavad Gita so that we can be completely free of fear and the problems of the human condition.

To better assimilate this reality, Vedanta has to be systematically studied with a guru, traditionally by listening to the teachings. Through 700 verses the dialogue of Bhagavad Gita continued until the Arjuna understood that there was no reason to grieve or fear and discovered that he was always free!

Om tat sat